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ABSTRACT

The New Teacher Retention Project is a collaborative partnership between San Diego State University and the San Diego Unified School District. The purposes of the project are to develop a practical model of support and assistance to new teachers, particularly those working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds, and to promote the retention of these teachers in such settings. The project involves university faculty from the arts and sciences (as well as faculty from the College of Education), along with staff development personnel, resource teachers, mentor teachers, and administrators from the school district. The project is jointly administered by the university and the school district. This paper discusses the three major components of the project: professional development, psychological and collegial support, and scholarships and materials stipends. The process of collaboration employed in the project and insights gained through it are also discussed. (JD)

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BALANCING ACCULTURATION TO THE PROFESSION AND ACCLIMATION TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT THROUGH A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL DISTRICT COLLABORATIVE INDUCTION PROGRAM

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BALANCING ACCULTURATION TO THE PROFESSION AND ACCLIMATION TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT THROUGH A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL DISTRICT COLLABORATIVE INDUCTION PROGRAM

The New Teacher Retention Project is a collaborative partnership between San Diego State University and the San Diego Unified School District. The purposes of the Retention Project are to develop a practical model of support and assistance to new teachers, particularly those working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds, and to promote the retention of these teachers in such settings. The Retention Project involves university faculty from the arts and sciences (as well as faculty from the College of Education), along with staff development personnel, resource teachers, mentor teachers, and administrators from the school district. The project is jointly administered by the university and the school district. The Dean of the College of Education serves as the project's principal investigator and primary liaison to the President of San Diego State University, the Chancellor's Office of the California State University system, and the Superintendent's Office of the California Department of Education. Two co-directors and an executive director share administrative responsibilities. The university-based co-director is a senior faculty member whose scholarship and expertise are in the areas of child development and educational programs and practices which are learner-centered; the school district based co-director is the director of the

staff development department in the school district. Her responsibilities include all professional growth and development initiatives within the school district. The executive director is responsible for the general management of the project, university-based personnel assignments, coordinating program component development, implementation and evaluation, budget development and monitoring and internal documentation and evaluation. Collectively these four individuals provide the project's policy leadership.

The Retention Project is supported by a four-year grant which is jointly funded by the Chancellor's Office of the California State University system and the Superintendent's Office of the California Department of Education, as well as contributions of the two collaborating institutions.

In this paper we will discuss the three major assistance components of the project: professional development, psychological and collegial support, and scholarships and materials stipends. The process of collaboration employed in the project and insights gained through it will also be discussed.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMPONENT

The professional development component of the Retention Project reflects a number of beliefs, shared by the project developers, about both teaching and the types of assistance new teachers need. First, we conceptualize teaching to be a highly

complex integration of knowledge and understanding, strategic and technical skills, attitudes and dispositions, analytic and synthesizing capabilities. Second, we believe that the judgments teachers make in practice are pivotal influences on student learning, and that the soundness of these judgments is a function of the depth and richness of these domains. Sound judgment can only be developed within the context of actual practice, but not without shared reflection, assistance, and collegial support. The environment of practice, therefore, must both encourage and value that development. This conception of teaching differs significantly from the narrowly technical and implicitly condescending "teacher-proof" notions embedded in the generic teaching effectiveness prescriptions that have been so pervasive in recent years.

Three key implications for structuring systematic assistance to new teachers follow from this conception. First, recognizing that the new teacher's first teaching assignment constitutes a period of transition, any assistance must address both continued acculturation to the profession (i.e. development of sound judgment, thoughtful informed practice, and a professional self-image defined in terms of these qualities) and acclimatization to the school and school district. Second, the assistance must be structured in such a way that it simultaneously draws out the knowledge and skills the new teacher brings to the enterprise and helps the new teacher contextualize the application and

adaptation of that knowledge and those skills to his/her actual situation. Third, the assistance must encourage the new teacher's confidence in her/his ability to work through problem situations and to engage with colleagues in shared problem-solving.

In addition to responding to these implications, we have structured this component of the Retention Project to minimize communicating a "survival" mentality to the new teachers, which too often translates to quick fixes for controlling and manipulating students. This concern takes on added poignancy when new teachers are working with culturally diverse populations. Finally, we have been cautious about structuring the content of the project on the basis of the new teachers' perceptions of what they need. Their inexperience can lead them to confuse symptoms with problems, and to the unrealistic expectation that pre-packaged, universally applicable answers exist. Projects which are solely "response" structured can easily fall prey to "doing for" or "doing to" teachers without actively involving their judgment or intellectual engagement. They engender both a sense of dependence and disillusionment. The latter eventuates when, believing there are "answers," teachers are told what to do, they do it (most often without any thought to context variables which might indicate adaptation rather then direct application), it does not work, and they feel cheated.

Over the course of the three years of the Retention Project we have developed the following structures, procedures, and content for the professional development component of the project. New teachers participating in the project are grouped by the schedule they are on (San Diego Unified School District actually runs five different schedules, with four tracks of year-round school and a traditional ten-month schedule), and by grade clusters if possible (primary, intermediate, middle school). Each group consists of no more than six new teachers (a faculty member from the College of Education at the university leads each of these clusters). Cluster leaders are selected on the basis of their expressed interest in working with new teachers and school district personnel as well as their subject matter/pedagogical expertise. This expertise allows us to build a strong interdisciplinary team.

We considered a number of factors in establishing cluster size. First, we wanted the clusters to be small enough that the new teachers and their cluster leader would be able to establish a group identity, get to know each other and have sufficient opportunity to actively participate in cluster meetings. The cluster size would also accommodate meetings between or among clusters without such situations becoming unwieldy. This cluster size translated very cleanly into instructional load credit or units for the faculty members. Under the college's supervision formula, this ratio equals three units, which is also the

standard number of units for a single course. This arrangement has the additional advantages of accommodating to changes in the number of new teachers and of establishing a standard cost measure for faculty services.

Each of the new teachers is also assigned a mentor. These expert teachers from the school district are matched with the new teachers on the basis of similarity in grade, curriculum and student assignments. Throughout the year the mentors work with their partnered new teacher individually and in the clusters.

The professional development component of the Retention Project is organized into a year-long series of evening seminars, release day workshops, and classroom visits. The content of the seminars and release days include issues and strategies related to each of the subject areas in the curriculum, understanding and working with youngsters from diverse backgrounds, classroom management and discipline, working with other adults in the school setting (particularly parents and teacher aides), and personal stress management. The strategies used to address these content areas consistently reflect the overall project purposes of acculturation and acclimatization. Seminar sessions are three hours long and occur each week that a cluster is in school, unless a release day has been scheduled. Over the course of the school year the new teachers participate in a total of ninety hours of combined release days and seminar time. In general, seminars consist of three segments. One segment includes a

presentation on a specific content topic followed by discussion through which the new teachers interact with the presenters on relating the presentation to their own teaching situation (for this part of the seminar a number of clusters may be together). Another segment consists of time for critical incident writing, during which each new teacher writes about something important to her/him that has occurred in their class or school. The third segment is a cluster discussion during which the new teachers may share their critical incident and seek input on strategies or related experiences others may have had, or during which there is further discussion of the earlier presentation.

The presentations are jointly planned by the school district and university personnel and, when possible, jointly presented. The presentations always include information about resources (people, materials, places, etc.) available through the school district, university, or broader community, and suggestions regarding how to access them. The presentation discussions always include some attention to issues of adaptation and contextual appropriateness. This is accomplished through a number of strategies. A new teacher may ask how something presented would be adapted to a multiple language class, or how it might be employed with a particular text series or curriculum. It also might be accomplished through the presenter posing questions about application, appropriateness, adaptation and

possible problems to the new teachers. The purpose is to address issues and questions of practice thoughtfully.

The critical incident writing is also employed to promote thoughtfulness about practice. If affords the new teachers an opportunity to reflect on what they and their class are doing, why things are happening as they are, what they are pleased with and want to sustain as well as what they think they need to change. The critical incidents reported are not necessarily problems or negative events. A number of the new teachers have written about progress they are having in an area of concern, events that have boosted their self-confidence, or flashes of insight that writing helps them preserve. The new teachers are not required to share what they have written with their clustermates. They do, however, turn them in to their cluster leader for written response or comment. This provides a systematic means of confidential communication and affords the cluster leader a regular opportunity to touch base with each new teacher. Cluster leaders also report that the critical incident writing alerts them to the need for individual assistance and to instances of confusing symptoms with problems.

The cluster discussion portion of the seminar can take a number of directions depending on the needs and interests of the group. Sharing experiences, commiserating, problem sharing and solving take up much of these sessions. They provide the new

teachers an opportunity to practice being collectively thoughtful, albeit highly practical, about teaching.

The release days (5 throughout the year) usually focus on a topic fairly new to the teachers and therefore requiring a longer concentration of time. Familiarizing the new teachers with the school district curriculum, related materials and resources, for example, was the topic of an early release day. During this workshop the new teachers had an opportunity to go through the various subjects with content specialists from the school district to explore points of emphasis, areas which might be problematic, and variations that could be employed within the given framework. Another release day is scheduled to help the new teachers become familiar with and comfortable using cooperative learning strategies. Here the release day affords the opportunity to try some things out in the safe and helpful company of colleagues. Mentor teachers often participate in the release days with the new teachers, frequently as presenters or demonstrators.

Through participation in the seminars and release days the new teachers also have the opportunity to earn six units of graduate credit from the university or the same number of continuing education units from the school district. The accumulated hours can be counted toward the state's requirement of 150 hours of continuing education every five years.

One of the more perplexing and persistent problems we have been working on is the determination of appropriate course expectations for earning credits. Traditional reading and writing assignments are often perceived by the new teacher as added burdens. Our current effort to overcome this dilemma requires that the new teachers prepare two case reports on issues they choose and which may be elaborations of a critical incident. The case reports include a reflection/analysis component as well as the description of an event or situation.

Project funding is used to pay for the substitute teachers on release days, any outside consultants, after-work hours for district resource teachers and mentors, and university fees for the graduate credits.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND COLLEGIAL SUPPORT

This component of the Retention Project is designed to minimize the sense of isolation and abandonment so many new teachers report having experienced in their first years of practice. The central feature of this component is the assignment of the new teacher to an expert mentor teacher as soon as possible after the new teacher has been hired. The mentor teachers, who are selected through a formal process in the district and receive specific training related to the mentoring role through the staff development department, are pivotal to successfully acculturating and acclimating the new teachers.

Through meetings with project administrators they come to understand and contribute to the conception of teaching described at the beginning of this paper. To the new teachers they personify credibility. They represent successful practice, ability, nay, virtuosity in what the new teacher is about to try. They possess the knowledge of the district as a distinct culture; they know how it works. They demonstrate the seasoned and balanced perspective which encourages risk-taking and engenders stability. New teachers consistently report the invaluable resource their mentors have been.

In addition to the mentor teachers, the cluster structure also helps the new teachers establish connections with their peers. The cluster leader prevents the new teacher from feeling cut off from the university.

The staff development office of the school district assigns one of its resource teachers to the Retention Project. This is a half-time assignment, supported by project resources. This person serves as a critical liaison between the new teachers and the various administrative and resource departments of the school district. He also fills a key planning and logistics role in the development of all facets of the project.

The support strategies are less formally structured than those in the professional growth component. The project provides resources for the new teachers to visit and work with their mentors and to have the mentors observe and consult in their

classes. None of the project support personnel participate in any way in the performance evaluation of the new teachers. This has been a source of reassurance to the new teachers, encouraging them to be candid and open. Project personnel do, when the situation warrants, advise and counsel the new teachers regarding their professional impressions of the advisability of the new teacher continuing in the education profession. These eventualities are seen as professional responsibilities and handled with utmost confidentiality.

One of the clearest indicators that this approach to collegial support is helpful comes from the new teachers, their building colleagues, and principals, all of whom report that participation in the project promotes a sense of confidence about working with colleagues and asking others besides those in the project for help, information, etc.

SCHOLARSHIP AND MATERIALS STIPENDS

The third assistance component of the Retention Project provides scholarship stipends to the new teachers for the university fees related to the graduate units. It also provides each new teacher with a $300.00 instructional materials stipend. This stipend makes it possible for the new teachers to acquire materials not provided by the school district. The availability of the stipend has encouraged the new teachers to become more critical consumers, considering long-term or diversified uses of

potential purchases. It has prompted them to explore very carefully what resources and materials the district will provide them with so that their own purchases do not turn out to be duplications. It has also been a practical prompt for them to seek the advice and assistance of their mentors, cluster leaders, and other resource personnel. The stipend has made purchase of materials another dimension of thoughtful practice. The new teachers gain access to the stipend by completing a request form which includes a rationale for the purchase. The new teacher's mentor, cluster leader, and the staff development resource teacher review the requests prior to disbursement. Frequently, the new teachers consult with these individuals about intended purchases and in so doing can ascertain if it is a wise purchase. The new teachers are limited to using no more than half of the stipend before January. Prior experience has taught us that this simply helps the new teachers give more critical thought to the investments they eventually make. The materials purchased with the stipends belong to the teachers, a tangible reminder of their participation with us.

COLLABORATION

School/university collaborations, as the literature suggests, are largely symbiotic in nature and synergistic in process. To be productive and resilient they require that the institutions involved clearly recognize their essential

differences in goals, priorities, modes of operating, organizational dynamics, language and culture. Collaboration, if it is to be fruitful, also depends on the participating institutions resisting inclinations to co-opt each other. The strength of any collaboration lies in the sustained independence, distinct expertise, resources, and perspectives each brings to the partnership. This is not to say, however, that within the actual workings of the partnerships people's ideas, perspectives and positions are not altered. Collaboration is a powerful vehicle for understanding, which in turn contributes to shared and creative problem-solving as well as risk-taking initiatives that eventuate in mutual benefit.

Synergy denotes actions of two discrete agencies which when undertaken in concert with one another, produce a total effect that is greater than the sum of the two effects generated independently. Successful collaboration is marked by this process. In the Retention Project the time and energy invested in joint planning, implementation, review and revision has inevitably produced a finer quality program than would be possible through wholly separate efforts or even cooperation.

A critical distinction between collaboration and cooperation is worth noting here. In the former there is a shared purpose and agenda emanating from an issue or situation in which each partner feels a compelling interest. It may relate to only a single area of each partner's total domain of responsibility;

each may be concerned with a distinct facet of it, but both institutions have some commitment to or interest in addressing it. Cooperation does not necessarily involve such a shared concern. It often can be accomplished with far less resource investment that can collaboration.

In the Retention Project the shared purpose relates to the continued professional development and quality of practice of new teachers. Both partners bring resources and expertise to bear on the acculturation domain of this goal. Both can contribute substantially and in complementary ways to the acclimatization process as well. The collaboration of personnel from both institutions on this shared purpose generates a richer, more comprehensive product than either could generate separately.

A number of actions and conditions have contributed significantly to the Retention Project both in terms of its surviving and in terms of its being successful in realizing its purposes. We believe these conditions are pertinent to any inter-institutional partnership. They are summarized below.

- The chief executive/administrative officers of each institution must affirm and periodically reaffirm institutional commitment to the collaboration.

- Personnel from each institution who share responsibility for policy and administrative leadership of the collaboration must have sufficient positional authority and access to policy

making/influencing within their own institution to be able to effect partnership work.

- Sufficient resources must be available for both the administrative/policy work of the partnership and implementation of collaborative initiatives. Two explanatory points are important here. Involvement in collaboration, especially in its initial stages, requires foundation laying--regular sustained discourse. Without resources to make that discourse possible within an individual's work assignments, resentments and disinterest are easily fostered. Collaborative initiatives take place, for the most part, as pilots within a "business as usual" environment. The surrounding programs and responsibilities of each institution are not suspended. Distinct resource availability to the collaboration is prudent and can reduce the likelihood of sabotage and discord between the collaboration initiatives and traditional programs and procedures.

- Broad-ranging involvement of personnel from diverse sectors of the institutions and a regular flow of information/communication regarding the collaboration serve to extend interest and commitment. They also increase the opportunity for richer, more creative collaborative work by encouraging varied ideas and perspectives.

- As important as administrative involvement is, investment of the largest portion of resources committed to the collaboration should be directed to actual initiatives and to

those implementing the initiatives. The proper balance is, of course, situation specific.

■ As much as possible, it is important to minimize the creation of separate policy and project review structures. Pertinent structures which already exist within each institution should be kept apprised of the collaborative work and build the needed support networks through them. This strategy can contribute substantially to institutionalizing both collaborative processes and the programs such work produces.

■ Do not ever lose sight of or minimize the importance of open honest communication among partners; issue-based arguments or strongly stated perspectives about issues often serve as conduits for understanding and creativity. Take breaks, but always come back! One of the truest indicators of a working collaboration is when individuals from different institutions align on an issue and together take on their colleagues.

■ Collaboration requires patience, perseverance, risk-taking and enthusiasm. Maintaining these, among all involved, frequently falls to the individual responsible for daily administrative direction of the collaboration. But everyone has to be alert to signals that communicate needed encouragement or reassurance. Keeping folks talking, exploring and pursuing the shared purpose in a good-natured way is a critically important task. Informal conversations or get-togethers can facilitate this. Good-natured teasing, joking, and humor (even banter) in

formal meetings are invaluable. Informal follow-up with individuals also serve to solidify candor and continued communication.

- Institutional leaders not directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the collaboration need to be kept informed of proceedings, issues, dilemmas, etc. In addition to being a basic professional courtesy, it can be of very practical value. It will promote the continued support of these critically important individuals; it protects them and the endeavor from being blindsided; it provides another perspective. These individuals can provide useful insights about strategies and tactics that will benefit the collaborative work. The process can be mutually satisfying.

- Clerical support specifically assigned to the collaboration is crucial. The logistics of this mode of operating are far more cumbersome than any other process. These resources contribute to the partnership's stability, efficiency, and ultimately, efficacy.

- Finally, self-regulated restraint on the part of all involved parties is absolutely essential. For the most part, key players in the collaboration are "movers and shakers" in their own institutions. They need to recognize the need for and contribute to the collaboration establishing its own foundations of understanding and mutual respect. They also need to

understand that for the collaboration to be effective, it needs to transcend traditional institutional boundaries.

Since, at its core, collaboration entails creative problem-solving and synergistic action, it requires considerable autonomy from standard operating procedures. Knowing how and where to leverage or manipulate those procedures as well as when not to veer too far afield is what makes the involvement of those individuals with the positional authority mentioned above so critical. These individuals also bring understanding of their institution's pervasive and sometimes intractable contextual realities. These realities necessitate restraint on the part of external sources of support to the collaboration. Failure to recognize contextual conditions or constraints and to incorporate those considerations in the form or shape of collaborative initiatives will minimize if not obviate the initiatives' intended effect. Noting such conditions often accommodates eventual exploration of the intractables, their merit and utility to the institution, and possibilities for reshaping them. Such entrès are foreclosed when collaborative work is externally mandated.

INSIGHTS

In each of the first two years of the Retention Project we provided assistance and support services to twenty-five new elementary teachers. This year thirty-six new teachers are

participating in the project. Through this work we have accumulated considerable insight and practical understanding about new teachers as emerging practitioners and strategies that can promote a thoughtful dimension in that process. These are briefly summarized here.

New teachers quickly, but with no small amount of surprise, come to recognize that teaching is psychologically, intellectually, and physically arduous. Their surprise at this is just one of a number of perplexing perceptions they bring to teaching. Another is that they believe they ought to know, in the sense of already being accomplished at, how to do things which they have never done before. And third, they tenaciously persist in believing that there are "answers" out there which they can simply superimpose on their own classes and which will transform them to some ideal condition. These beliefs and perceptions reflect a not-yet-fully-developed conception of the inherent complexities of teaching.

Many of the new teachers also demonstrate an understandable preoccupation with the immediate and practical. Their attention and energies are exclusively focused on the proximate. They often demonstrate limited confidence in their own ability to apply or utilize what they have learned and do know. Rather than viewing these traits as maladies or deficiencies, which can engender a "doing to" or "doing for" response, we view them as simply the conditions with which we start. They are both natural

and understandable. Indeed they are the reason neophytes need structured support and assistance to advance their professional development.

Assistance then is multifaceted. It must include personal propping up along with encouraging self and peer reliance. It has to be structured to simultaneously foster self-confidence and commitment to continuing to build a sound basis of knowledge and skill to sustain that confidence. Most importantly it has to emanate from reality of their teaching, from the problems, situations, conditions, and content of their own work.

The structuring of the support network, coupled with thoughtful reflection on their own experiences, promotes attending to the immediate while simultaneously developing habits of mind and practice that will sustain these teachers well beyond the first year.